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*THE POETS ON THE POETS—NO. 3*

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TENNYSON

*by*

HUMBERT WOLFE



# TENNYSON

BY

HUMBERT WOLFE

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# TENNYSON

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION TO *MAUD*

ALFRED TENNYSON was born in 1809. *Maud* was published in 1855. And with the enunciation of these two dates perishes the legend that Tennyson—the poet—died, like Chatterton, in his marvellous boyhood. In the middle forties, and already Poet Laureate, he was master of his most various, technically perfect and sustained lyric note. Not only that but almost alone of the major poets his definitely singing quality appreciated with the passing years. Tennyson was wiser than the thrush. He not only sang each note twice over, but enriched and embroidered it with repetition.

This is so obvious that it has naturally escaped attention. It is the convenient critical habit to divide Tennyson into his early period as a poet, and his later as an uninspired Seer. The plain truth, however, is that in 1830 he was seeing as conscientiously in *Confessions of a Second-rate Sensitive Mind* as in *Locksley Hall Revisited*, and that in 1855 the birds in the high Hall garden sang as clear and as fresh as on the road to 'many-towered Camelot'. We are indeed entitled to claim that Tennyson would have been better able to write *The Idylls of the King* than *Maud* when he was twenty-one. His in-

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tellect was, if not static, at least stabilized very early, but his lyrical powers continued their unrivalled development into his middle years.

For the critic anxious either to prove or disprove this almost platitudinous conclusion a close study of *Maud* is essential, and the study, when completed will indicate that subsequent English verse owes far more to this single poem than it lost in all the gentle by-paths of *The Idylls of the King*.

The first point to be isolated is the quality of Tennyson's emotion. A thousand different estimates have jostled one another. He has been pictured as a strange dark boy, roaming the Somersby fens, a passionate lonely figure against those abrupt skylines. He is seen there with something of the cold-pitched high anger of the seamew, and involved in the mystery of the sea. This changeling—in a family of poets—moved on alien tides of blood, and responded to a sea-drag out of some strange ancestry. The young man of this portrait overheard not 'the horns of elf-land faintly blowing' but the fatal sweet music of Coleridge's demon-lover. He it was for whom death was at the end of every way. He was the Mariana of his own heart—this tall swarthy black-maned exile, and it was his own truth that he spoke when in the 1830 volume he published:

With blackest moss the flower-pots  
Were thickly crusted, one and all:  
The rusted nails fell from the knots  
That held the pear to the garden-wall.

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The broken sheds look'd sad and strange :  
Unlifted was the clinking latch ;  
Weeded and worn the ancient thatch  
Upon the lonely moated grange.  
She only said, 'My life is dreary,  
He cometh not,' she said ;  
She said, 'I am aweary, aweary,  
I would that I were dead.'

The young man of this picture left Somersby Rectory with that melancholy tempest in his blood for Cambridge—and Arthur Hallam. Psycho-analytical methods have not actually been applied to Tennyson's feeling for that bright and transient friend. But by careful juxtaposition of passages from letters, and by arrangement of episodes and incidents a hint of something passionate has been implied. Nothing bodily, of course, but a leap in the blood that was consistent with the odd violence of the strange passionate boy. But Hallam—either because he did not requite this wild appeal or because he was something of a radiant prig—sought steadily to reduce the temperature by advice that in a man of seventy would have been a trifle presumptuous. As the details of this portrait proceed we are presented with a passionate nature driven in upon itself. Hallam's death and a growing belief in some prophetic mission changed, we are led to assume, the half-savage, half-mystic singer into something increasingly docile and self-composed. In the period between 1832 when *The Poems*—including *Oenone* and *The Lady of Shalott*—were published till 1842 there was silence, broken only

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by the appearance of occasional poems in magazines. This silence, it is suggested, was due in part to bitter humiliation caused by hostile criticism of his work, but still more to the spiritual change-over from wild boy-poet to the sobriety of mid-Victorian comment on the universe. At the end of that decade a new and tamed Tennyson emerged, it seems, to storm the heart of England with tired aphorisms and enthusiasms carefully adjusted to the mild apprehension of young women of the middle-class.

And thirteen years later the barn-door fowl slanted a swan-wing with *Maud*. Only an extreme of insensitiveness and an automatic reaction against Victorianism in general could have paltered with such nonsense. If we consider for an instant some of the new poems of 1842 we shall find in them not only the purest lyric beauty, but fire in the bowels like the rays of a tumbled star. For example, let us take *Ulysses* as proof of the slow decline into domesticity.

I will drink  
Life to the lees; all times I have enjoy'd  
Greatly, have suffered greatly, both with those  
That loved me and alone; on shore, and when  
Thro' scudding drifts the rainy Hyades  
Vext the dim sea :

'Thro' scudding drifts the rainy Hyades'—this is a blank verse splendour that England had not known since Milton died. Remarkable not only first for the restoration of that great poetic mode

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after long disuse and abuse, but hot as though the words were molten metal forged for the first time:

Come my friends,  
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.  
Push off, and sitting well in order smite  
The sounding furrows: for my purpose holds  
To sail beyond the sunset and the baths  
Of all the Western stars, until I die.  
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:  
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,  
And see the great Achilles whom we knew.  
Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'  
We are not now that strength which in old days  
Moved earth and heaven: that which we are, we are:  
One equal temper of heroic hearts,  
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will  
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

That last line rings back to the last of *Samson Agonistes*. It is the same solemn glory of the pyre, that does not falter for death or for the sorrow of death. And mark how throughout this great poem the poet delivers himself to the objective. His own thought, his own hope, his own self are laid aside. He has listened, he has overheard. But note still more how the shape of the verse has steadied, and added to itself the ringing variety of the monosyllable—the last conquest for the English poet. Compare it in this regard with *Oenone* of 1832—a marvel of music, but in the Lydian strain

O mother Ida, many-fountained Ida,  
Dear mother Ida, hearken ere I die.  
For now the noonday quiet holds the hill:  
The grasshopper is silent in the grass:

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The lizard with his shadow on the stone  
Rests like a shadow, and the cicala sleeps.  
The purple flowers droop: the golden bee  
Is lily-cradled. I alone awake.  
My eyes are full of tears, my heart of love,  
My heart is breaking and my eyes are dim,  
And I am all aweary of my life.

Let us put aside the *Mariana* impulse of the last line, and the fatal persuasions of the dissyllable *Ida* in the first two, and let us rather contrast

✓ My eyes are full of tears, my heart of love  
with

✓ To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield.

In the first the monosyllables are excused by the regularity of the beat, but in the second the monosyllables make the beat. In the first the young poet is taking instructions from his words. In the second line the words are happily accepting orders. It is not only an increase of confidence: there is a change in kind. The fire from within has met the fire from without, and the two are one flame. Nor is it only in those lines that the ascetic power is growing. There is more passion in *Ulysses* than in all the dove-like lamentations of *Oenone*, and it is a male passion asserting itself with quiet authority. For the feathery echoes of the earlier poem we have the great assurance of marching feet. There is in *Ulysses* a poet speaking of what he knows. He has touched at the Happy Isles, and he has seen

the great Achilles whom we knew.

True it is that the reflections of a second-rate

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sensitive mind are not abated, but they are neither more evident nor more discouraging. Moreover it must be remembered that at this period of spiritual anarchy we are unduly impatient of any form of intellectual assurance. It is easy to suffer a shiver of almost physical discomfort when we read in *Locksley Hall*

Fool again the dream, the fancy! but I know my words are  
wild,

But I count the grey barbarian lower than the Christian child.

Not in vain the distance beacons. Forward, forward let us  
range.

Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of  
change.

Thro the shadow of the globe we sweep into the younger day.  
Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay.

Or we may look at one another with a meaning  
smile, when in the agony of *The Two Voices* we  
come on the interlude describing the family on its  
way to church:

One walk'd between his wife and child  
With measured footfall firm and mild,  
And now and then he gravely smiled.

The prudent partner of his blood  
Lean'd on him, faithful, gentle, good,  
Wearing the rose of womanhood.

We may shiver and smile meaningly, but in either case we shall be great fools. In the first place there is no change in Tennyson's mental approach to what he believed was a philosophy of life. At



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exactly the same level and in the same accent he wrote in the prologue to *The Palace of Art*:

seeing not  
That Beauty, Good and Knowledge are three sisters  
That doat upon each other, friends to man,  
Living together under the same roof,  
And never can be sunder'd without tears.

or earlier still in the enunciation of what he believed to be his creed:

The poet in a golden clime was born  
With golden stars above;  
Dower'd with the hate of hate, the scorn of scorn  
The love of love.

He saw thro' life and death, thro' good and ill,  
He saw thro' his own soul,  
The marvel of the everlasting will  
An open scroll  
Before him lay:

Both in practice and precept, therefore, in his earliest work Tennyson had ranged himself in this aspect, and there is nothing even in the extreme sentimentousness of parts of *The Princess* and *The Idylls of the King* which goes beyond this original alignment. But to say so much may be taken to be an admission that on one side of his work Tennyson was an inferior poet from the outset. I do not make that admission because I believe it to be untrue. I do not assert (it would be futile) that in the realm of thought Tennyson had the slow brooding revelation of Wordsworth, or the prophetic fire of Blake. But he did definitely contribute to the

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thought of his time, so much so that we cannot think of the Victorian mind without thinking of Tennyson.

Two points might be considered briefly arising upon this. In the first place is it the poet's business to state or restate the articles of faith of a generation? And secondly, if it be, is he poet if he only summarizes these without altering or appreciably enriching them? The first is the old problem of the didactic in art—argued too often and too fruitlessly to be re-examined at length here. One thing, however, is clear that any poet, who seeks to add to the vocabulary of the thrush the note of humanity, must address his mind to the thoughts and aspirations of his time. He need not therefore set up his everlasting rest as an itinerant preacher or a farthing-dip philosopher. But his times must speak through and in him. Consciously? I am not prepared to answer. When Milton, for example, justified the ways of God to man he was a politician, because all politicians of his time were theologians. It was not necessary for him to propound the doctrines of the Ironside Barebones in close detail. He opened his mind to the religious emotion of the time, and he recollected it in tranquillity. He might have ended his career with *Il Penseroso* and *Lycidas* and a faultless poet he would then have been. But the less Milton he. A poet must be a harp for the wandering winds of doctrine and opinion. He must tune them to the string, but he cannot let them wail by unharvested. The thrushes—

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Herrick, Keats, in less degree Shelley, and in our own time Flecker and Davies—seek no more than to understand and illuminate their own hearts by leaning them against the thorn of beauty. But the others—Milton, Wordsworth, Browning, and perhaps Yeats—must concern themselves with the outer world. They need not vindicate mortality, but they must at least explain it to itself.

And, therefore, Tennyson inevitably and rightly, like his own Lady of Shalott, left the web and left the loom and look'd down to Camelot. Nor did the mirror crack from side to side. It reflected truly if, as mirrors do, on the surface what was presented to his view. Nor were the passing objects negligible. We sometimes pretend that the period from 1830 to 1860 was one of smug self-satisfaction, and regard the Victorians as whiskered Fundamentalists. Nothing could be further from the truth. It was, on the contrary, a time when faiths and unfaiths were being rudely tested, when the old order was changing under men's eyes and giving place to something new and, it seemed, dangerous. If at this distance we convert the maelstrom into the placid waters of a tarn, it is because distance lends spurious tranquillity to the view. There was a moral typhoon blowing and Tennyson was at the heart of it. The Christian creed, no less, was on its trial, and nobody, unless a sluggard or a fool, could be indifferent. From his early boyhood Tennyson was rocked to the soul by doubts and difficulties, and we need not necessarily regard his reactions

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and conclusions as shallow because we do not agree with them.

But, we must ask ourselves, if our poet involved himself in these problems, did he lose the poet, when he sought to be, if not a seer, at least a teacher? On that we may observe that each considerable creative age has its own way of dealing with ultimate realities—and all are equally wrong for all time, and equally right for themselves. The Victorians were dazzled by the flood of new light in which they walked. The industrial age was upon them uncharted and unforeseen, and that grim robot—the machine—with its waving pistons mechanically destroyed not only beauty, but inherited tranquillity in the soul. If England had been a walled garden in the eighteenth century, the walls were now not merely razed but blown sky-high. And a violent mob of men and thoughts trampled down every allegory and set up the spinning Jenny in place of the garden-god.

In times of extreme spiritual disorder some captain must be found who can restore and re-establish, or rather if he must not be found, he must be sought. It followed therefore that when one great destructive name after another appeared on the horizon the startled herds would huddle under the tree and look for their shepherd. They found in fact a colony of shepherds. In every department of life and thought arose champions who violently asserted that nothing was changed or could change. These—and Tennyson was one of

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them—declared that truth was not less true because of coal and the machine, nor was the Bible unthroned because the political structure was suffering from disintegration. It is easy to be impatient, and to call the reassurances thus offered facile and even cowardly. But we live in a different thunderstorm. Our fears are different, our hopes and our aspirations—and our solutions are not less transitory and will no less lead to cruel and ignorant reaction. But there is nothing fundamentally more poetic in the doctrine of despair (our panacea) than in hope to which the Victorians clung. And if Tennyson dared to hope and succeeded in believing we may envy, but we need not jeer.

Nevertheless we must still ask if (as his critics contend) Tennyson merely summed up the opinion of his time, and then delivered his summing up like a sentence pronounced by Radamanthus. To assert this is mere intellectual hostility, for the truth is that this poet in his doubts, in his passionate search for their solution, and in his gasping salvation suffered and revealed in his own person the experiences of a generation. He expressed his age, because he was in sentiment and faith a Victorian as Shakespeare was an Elizabethan. We may prefer the earlier (and perhaps the lesser) to the later queen, but we are not entitled to abuse Tennyson for serving Victoria, while we exalt William's representation of Gloriana.

And, as I have already said, this attempt to grapple with the times was no middle-aged spread.

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The boy Tennyson was no less engaged 'in mental fight' than the author of the *Idylls*. Let us return to the *Supposed Confessions of a Second-rate Sensitive Mind not in Unity with itself*, published in the 1830 volume:

'Why not believe then,' cries the anguished youth.

Why not believe then? Why not yet  
Anchor thy frailty there, where man  
Hath moor'd and rested? Ask the sea  
At midnight when the crisp slope waves  
After a tempest, rib and fret  
The broad-imbased beach, why he  
Slumbers not like a mountain-tarn?

ending on a note of agony as sincere as the love-cry in *Fatima* with the desolation of:

O weary life! O weary death!  
O spirit and heart made desolate!  
O damnéd vacillating state!

There spoke the 'malaise' not of the 'junge Werther' but of an ageing and terrified world—in an accent that *The Two Voices* of 1842 elaborated but did not change.

Again the voice spake unto me:  
'Thou art so steep'd in misery  
Surely 'twere better not to be.  
Thine anguish will not let thee sleep,  
Nor any train of reason keep:  
Thou canst not think but thou wilt weep.'

It needs no more to prove the uniformity of mood, and no more on which to base the claim that

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Tennyson was here writing not sophistry but poetry, because he spoke from his heart and from the heart of his age. And from that darkness in *The Two Voices* he emerges into light:

Such seem'd the whispers at my side:  
'What is it thou knowest, sweet voice?' I cried.  
'A hidden hope,' the voice replied.

So heavenly-toned, that in that hour  
From out my sullen heart a power  
Broke, like the rainbow from the shower.

To feel, altho' the tongue can prove  
That every cloud, that spreads above  
And veileth love, itself is love.

It is only one short step further from this to the final organ-notes of *In Memoriam*.

No longer half-akin to brute,  
For all we thought and loved and did,  
And hoped and suffer'd, is but seed  
Of what in them is flower and fruit:

Whereof the man, that with me trod  
This planet, was a noble type  
Appearing ere the times were ripe  
That friend of mine who lives in God.

That God which ever lives and loves,  
One God, one law, one element,  
And one far-off divine event  
To which the whole creation moves.

This may be false doctrine to us to-day, as our ululations may ring tinnily a hundred years hence.

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But it is not a summary any more than the Ten Commandments are a précis of the mind of God. It is England speaking with passion, if in blindness. It is the voice of a generation, and it has the permanence of doubt, of failure, and of faith.



## CHAPTER II

### MAUD—THE TECHNIQUE

I HAVE attempted to show that Tennyson did not between 1830 and 1842 lose his Somersby wildness in the blood, and that on the other hand his attempt to grapple with the times was native in him from the beginning. Both these contentions are sustained and indeed proved up to the hilt by the great poem which he published in 1855. I have therefore taken *Maud* as the central theme of this pamphlet. It was written in the middle of his poetic life. It is technically only not virtuosity because that word has acquired a critical implication. Its form is unlike anything that preceded it in English literature, and both the technique and the form profoundly affected the subsequent course of English poetry. It is as passionate as *Romeo and Juliet* and it contains two of the most beautiful love-poems in the English language. And finally, it is essentially the product of the time in which it was written, and no less in a poem where he was writing his heart out than in his purely reflective poems the poet definitely occupies himself with current affairs. *Maud* is therefore a microcosm of Tennyson. If rightly understood we shall understand why Tennyson held his own generation and must always hold minds that have not denied the

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Holy Ghost of direct apprehension of love in beauty.

And since the poem has such heat in it, I am tempted for a moment to dwell on the fact that Tennyson married Miss Emily Sellwood in 1850 after an engagement lasting some twenty years. Speculations on the intimacies of a writer's life are often distasteful and generally misleading. Byron's alleged relations with his sister, however much their examination may stimulate the baser passions of the detective, can and could throw no light on the genius that wrote *The Vision of Judgment*. Shelley's treatment of Harriet is an affair between him and his soul and is no concern of the reader. Its dissection by ruthless professors is merely an unusually deplorable bout of vivisection. But the case of Tennyson is different in that he is accused of sentimentality and moral flabbiness. The twenty years that he was content to wait for his bride (and her gentle feathered wifeliness) are both used as proof that Tennyson was a hen imitating with extraordinary dexterity the single charged note of the nightingale.

That is, of course, malicious rubbish, but it does impel me to venture an explanation of that curious episode in my poet's life. We cannot fall back on a purely material explanation of lack of money or a father's refusal to consent to his daughter's marriage. It is true that during a part of the time Tennyson was far from rich, but a poet who would not put it to the touch on that ground would be

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difficult to defend. The truth, as I see it, is quite different. Arthur Hallam died in 1833, and for the moment the power of mortal love in Tennyson died with him. I am not even interested in whether Tennyson's feeling for Hallam was unusual, or passing the love of man for woman. I know only that it was a consuming fire as truly first love as any starlit shadow in a girl's eyes. I do not know the exact date at which *Break, break, break*, published in the 1842 volume was written. I conjecture, however, that it was not possible for Tennyson to have found the key to his absolute heartache for some years after Hallam's death. I should therefore place it about 1838 or 1839, because a great emotion cannot be immediately translated into great verse. I know no poem in the world so near a sob as:

Break, break, break  
On thy cold grey stones, O sea!  
And I would that my tongue could utter  
The thoughts that arise in me.

And because I am certain that the poem was the frozen heart at last melting into tears, I believe Tennyson through all these years to have been ice-locked in a passionate sorrow that would not let him put to sea. But it was an excess, and not absence of emotion, that clasped him with hands of frost. A soul so storm-bound might easily, and like a sleep-walker, slip into the relationship with Emily Sellwood that Tennyson contracted so soon

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after Hallam's death. Moreover, the very reason for the contact was that in the first place because of her sister she was a connecting link with Hallam. It was no parlour courtship of the patient clerical type. It was a soul tried beyond endurance, clinging patiently to something warm and kind and human in a great and howling darkness.

'If that be true, then it is clear that till the passionate longing for Hallam was out of his blood Tennyson, being what he was, could not have married Emily. It was one thing to owe her the tenderness of a dear friend, it would have been quite another to have admitted her to the inner shrine where over the altar Hallam's single flame was steadily burning. But I believe it to be no mere coincidence that the year of his marriage should have coincided with the year of the publication of *In Memoriam*. Tennyson had erected his monument to the love of his youth more lasting than brass. It was his farewell to Hallam and his youth. 'Ave atque in aeternum vale' he cried, looking back for the last time—and so went forward into his new life with his new love.

It was thus that his spirit was freed to write *Maud*, and I see, perhaps fantastically, in the songs in *The Princess* the steps leading to his marriage and the release of the ice-age of his heart in almost violent music. These songs are perhaps the most widely known and admired in all Tennyson's work, and in a sense rightly so. For they have a beauty

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of reverie that he never excelled. But the point that I would note in them is first that though love-poems they are poems not of exceeding but gentle melancholy, and secondly, that there is in them a cadence of expectation which magnificently culminates in the last three poems *Ask me no more, Now sleeps the crimson petal*, and *Come down O maid from yonder mountain-height*. The first poems are all gentle whispers of married love.

There above the little grave  
O there above the little grave  
We kiss'd again with tears.

and

Sleep and rest, sleep and rest,  
Father will come to thee soon,  
Rest, rest, on mother's breast,  
Father will come to thee soon.

From there the soul of the lover withdraws to that elf-land that has stolen his heart's love away:

O heark! O hear! how thin and clear  
And thinner, clearer, farther going!  
O sweet and far from cliff and scar  
The horns of Elfland faintly blowing.

He is stolen away—poor changeling—and in the green fairy twilights of despair, whence naught returns, he cries in the loveliest sorrow that man ever changed to words:

Dear as remember'd kisses after death,  
And sweet as those by hopeless fancy feign'd  
On lips that are for others, deep as love,  
Deep as first love, and wild with all regret,  
O death in life, the days that are no more.

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From that he tries a swallow-flight back into the world of men and human love:

O swallow, flying from the golden woods,  
Fly to her, and pipe and woo her, and make her mine,  
And tell her, tell her, that I follow thee.

But he cannot follow yet. The struggle is not ended: the bonds of fairyland are not so easily broken:

Thy voice is heard through rolling drums  
he cries, dream-enchanted:

That beat to battle where he stands,  
a doubtful battle, and a dark issue. For in the next poem the warrior has fallen and the hosts of elf-land have prevailed.

Home they brought her warrior dead  
She nor swoon'd nor utter'd cry

but death and the lost love of Hallam have not prevailed. For the heart is near to its salvation, and suddenly in tears the wild rush back to life comes:

Like summer tempest came her tears—  
Sweet my child I live for thee.

These were the tears for which Tennyson had waited since the day they brought him the news from Vienna. And now mark the next poem of life returning:

Our enemies have fall'n, have fall'n and the seed  
The little seed they laughed at in the dark,

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Has riven and cleft the soil, and grown a bulk  
Of spanless girth, that lays on every side  
A thousand arms and rushes to the sun.

And then greatly yielding and delivering himself to  
the sweets of life:

Ask me no more: thy fate and mine are seal'd,  
I strove against the stream and all in vain:  
Let the great river take me to the main:  
No more, dear love, for at a touch I yield.  
Ask me no more.

She did not need to ask. He had yielded, and in the  
silence of the heart, after such pain so long en-  
dured, he sings the marvellous hymn of love return-  
ing from the dark under the benedictions of night  
and the medicable stars:

Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white;  
Now waves the cypress in the palace walk;  
Now winks the gold fin in the porphyry font;  
The fire-fly wakens: waken thou with me.

So it is at evening to be followed by that murmur-  
ous day of love when there shall be:

Myriads of rivulets hurrying thro' the lawn,  
The moan of doves in immemorial elms,  
And murmuring of innumerable bees.

Tennyson was ready for the love of woman and for  
*Maud*.

In considering the poem I will comment first  
upon its technique, in which respect it is fantastic-  
ally adequate. It is a contemporary habit to bend  
adoring eyes on the metrical achievement of Pope,

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and even to suggest that he was the only great English poet who used our language as though it were French. There is some truth in that view for Pope had a wholesome respect for words, and did pay anxious attention to their wishes. It is equally true that he was a little in awe of them, treating them like Court dignitaries who had to be conciliated. Tennyson cared for words no less, but he was their living master rather than their adoring disciple. Nor need anyone who has read *The Devil and the Lady* wonder at his skill. At the age of fourteen Tennyson could write blank verse so sensitive, so easy, and so varied that we are literally transported back through the centuries to the performances of the young Milton. After seeing that exercise the Muse of English verse must have taken a deep breath, laid her hand on the boy's hair, and with her slow adorable smile have whispered in his ear, 'Well then!'

It was very well then and increasingly well till all the rockets went up together in *Maud*. Wordsworth, so he says, wrote on a theory of prosody and Coleridge in the diction of a dream, but Tennyson took language, like a goldsmith, and hammered it into the exact and lasting shape that he desired. *Maud* is bewildering both in its general form and in its metrical virtuositities. Tennyson had a simple story to tell as follows. The son of a squire, who had been ruined by the machinations (it seems) of some local rival, broods on his father's suicide. The daughter of the rival house, 'Maud', is return-



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ing from abroad, and the young man (whose name is not disclosed) remembering her as the playmate of his childhood, speculates on the effect that her return may have on him. It is in a sense the Montagu-Capulet theme, and inevitably this Romeo-Jaques will love and be loved by his Juliet-Rosalind. But there is the brother of 'Maud' to be reckoned with—the 'dandy-despot', the 'oil'd and curl'd Assyrian bull'—who has a lover of high estate in waiting for his sister. In the quarrel that results the lover fights and seems to kill the brother. He flies the country and the story ends with his reflections in exile.

Not a very elaborate nor very ingenious plot, but it is told in a most ingenious way. For Tennyson here invented the new method of narrative in verse which has since passed into general use. He has diverted the straightforward story—the heritage from Homer and Virgil—obediently followed by all narrative poets before him. He grasped the new truth that since poetry tells its tales in lightning-flashes with no need of reboant thunder, the reader might be allowed to fill in the prose. He saw for the first time that it was enough for the poet to do a series of apparently disconnected pastels and to leave the silences between to weave the complete tapestry in the reader's mind. It seems so obvious a method, and has become so universal since, that we tend to imagine that it is as old as the Epic. It is not. Tennyson invented it, and when Mr. T. S. Eliot wrote *The Waste Land* he was merely carrying

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the *Maud* scheme to an almost painfully logical conclusion. For Tennyson left gaps that the ordinary mind could reasonably be expected to fill; Mr. Eliot leaves spaces as wide as those between a star and a star, which only genius could hope to leap. But whatever the difference of degree the mould is the same, and Tennyson cast it.

The poem opens with the heavy spondees of:

I hate the dreadful hollow behind the little wood,  
Its lips in the field above are dabbled with blood-red heath.

—a ponderous dragging metre on which to open. And why? Because without descending to onomatopœia Tennyson had to find a metrical shape to match the heavy mood of horror. Pope, for example, could only induce horror by slightly weighting his decasyllabic line with the result that his darkness is to Tennyson's as is the French Bible to the English. Tennyson with reckless cunning strikes out this heavy halting line to go with the heavy halting heart:

What am I raging alone as my father raged in his mood?  
Must I too creep to the hollow and dash myself down and die?  
Still that gaol-clanking in the spirit that peers  
furtively out through its bars at the doubtful vision  
of release. But now *Maud* comes and amazingly  
in the third stanza the same metre alters the beat,  
and slides into the smooth beginnings of escape:

Cool and clear-cut face why come you so cruelly meek,  
Breaking a slumber in which all spleenful folly was drown'd,  
Pale with the golden beam of an eyelash dead on the cheek,  
Passionless, pale, cold face, star-sweet on a gloom profound.

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It is the same metre with nothing but the stresses altered yet rising with a grave half-stormy sweep to:

The shining daffodil dead, and Orion low in his grave.

And it is done quite simply (perhaps even unconsciously) by the use of true-beating dissyllables and trisyllables and unstressed monosyllables. No longer must each syllable stagger along, bearing its full and uneasy weight. But even so, as doubt returns, the heavy beats slide back and we come back to the same deaf despair in:

The Mayfly is torn by the swallow, the sparrow spear'd by  
the shrike  
And the little wood where I sit is a world of plunder and prey  
and again in a final fling of resolute ugliness it is  
written:

Your father is ever in London, you wander about at will  
and then the lift before the first true notes—a lift  
that Swinburne later captured and poor Stephen  
Phillips overheard for his *Paolo and Francesca*:

You have but fed on the roses and laid in the lilies of life. X  
Follows stanza V corresponding to the gradual  
freedom of the heart, a verse-form so free that we  
may well rub our eyes and wonder if something has  
not strayed in here out of an Imagist Anthology:

Silence, beautiful voice!  
Be still, for you only trouble the mind  
With a joy in which I cannot rejoice,  
A glory I shall not find.

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Still! I will hear you no more,  
For your sweetness hardly leaves me a choice  
But to move to the meadow and fall before  
Her feet on the meadow grass, and adore,  
Not her, who is neither courtly nor kind,  
Not her, not her, but a voice.

Tennyson was not deliberately running in his dactyls, for no poet, who ever wrote serious verse, assured himself in advance that he would pepper his rhythm with one combination of sounds rather than another. But in great poetry the shape of the thought translates itself into the appropriate verbal shapes. It was obvious that the slow length of the opening stanzas would not serve the need of the tremulous awakening of love. Nor in that freedom, which the poet himself had won after all those years of patient ascent from Hell, were any of the regular forms he had either used or invented to his mind. Like the Imagists, but for a different reason, he wanted to cast off the shackles of tradition. 'I will find', he said unconsciously, 'a metre as unrestrained as the darkness of the heart, and as wild with all delight' and so stanza V. But in VI with doubt and self-examination we are back in a world dictated from without, and the metre swings back accordingly to a more usual beat, though there is still a hint of the happy breathlessness of expectation. There is on the surface at least a deliberate dullness that extends into the even duller shape of VII—an almost inexplicable stanza except that I guess that the clumsy weakness is again the half-

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deliberate projection of the shape in the poet's mood. In VIII we are half-way back to the liberties of elf-land, though complete enfranchisement is here checked by a doubt, as in VI complete despair is mitigated by some golden shred of hope:

She came to the village church,  
And sat by a pillar alone;  
An angel watching an urn  
Wept over her, carved in stone;

and so on to that extraordinary couplet:

The snowy-banded, dilettante,  
Delicate-handed priest intone;

extraordinary, not only for the internal rhythm but for the use of *enjambement* on a stopped beat, which we have always believed was Walter de la Mare's contribution to English prosody. And yet not extraordinary, because in this poem the master-craftsman at the height of his powers had every crescendo and diminuendo that the ear could undertake at his command.

IX and X are stanzas of preparation for great song. Here are the measures of discomfort again with the slow monosyllabic knell-note at the end with:

~~And back~~  
✓ ~~Then~~ returns the dark  
With no more hope of light

And all through X there is the hint of the wounded snake dragging its slow length along to end with a sudden bitter memory of *Break, break, break* in the lines:

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And ah! for a man to arise in me,  
That the man I am may cease to be.

It was natural that the rhythm should remember, even if the poet did not, the lost beloved Hallam, because it is the long farewell to dark. So that XI almost shyly breaks into the small patter of rain on the leaves—an indistinct movement but very cool on the forehead and upon tired eyes. And so to XII and one of the great love-rhythms of the language. Tennyson is not yet at the beloved's heart, but he has overheard its beat, thus:

Birds in the high Hall garden  
When twilight was falling,  
Maud, Maud, Maud, Maud,  
They ~~That~~ were crying and calling.

Where was Maud? in our wood;  
And I, who else, was with her,  
Gathering woodland lilies,  
Myriads blow together.

This is the delivered cadence of young love, and consider how surprisingly attained. Tennyson has dared to add to the length of the actual word its dream-shadow. He can therefore swing from his dissyllabic 'garden' to his 'Maud, Maud, Maud, Maud', because the heart carries the rhythm over to the clear thrush-rapture of 'They were crying and calling'. And in the next verse he can as easily, and for the same reason, invert his rhythms, and he can with complete assurance use a half-rhyme. Once again he has demonstrated to all

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later poets that in the ear of passion there are overtones that furnish a sweet and ghostly obligato. -

Equally naturally after that escape into the forest Tennyson returns in XIII to his slower mood. This was 'the swallow, swallow, flying, flying South' *motif*, but the wing is arrested. The daffodil has come before the swallow dared. Here is question again:

But his essences turn'd the live air sick,  
And barbarous opulence jewel-thick  
Sunn'd itself on his breast and his hands.

But it is only an interruption of half-sweet self-torture because the poet is on his way to XIV and a rhythmical freedom wilder even than V:

And I thought as I stood, if a hand as white  
As ocean-foam in the moon, were laid  
On the hasp of the window, and my Delight  
Had a sudden desire, like a glorious ghost, to glide,  
Like a beam of the seventh Heaven, down to my side,  
There were but a step to be made.

There is indeed a little more than one step to be made, for we have still to follow a star-bemused passage through the XVth stanza to find:

Catch not my breath, O clamorous heart,  
Let not my tongue be a thrall to my eye,  
For I must tell her before we part,  
I must tell her, or die.

But once again the metre is the glove of the thought showing every least wrinkle and glowing to each most private gesture:

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Maud has a garden of roses  
And lilies fair on a lawn;

'The roses' have no rhyme. They are denied one of a set (though probably unconscious) purpose. They are to bloom alone outlined against the background of song. For all through the growing ecstasy their perfume and their form is given out like a Beethoven theme. Distinct roses—listen how they mix into the variations of the little too-conscious love-song of XVII:

Rosy is the West,  
Rosy is the South,  
Roses are her cheeks,  
And a rose her mouth.

This is the worst poem in *Maud* and in a sense naturally so. For here neither the poet nor the cadence have given themselves time to think, and scarcely time to breathe. The incredible event has suddenly come to pass: the god of love has put on flesh and stepped down from his heaven, a man among men. That is the instant for the silence at the heart's core. Only long afterwards can that moment be recaptured and reduced to song. This is but the babble of the soul when it has passed beyond words, and the metrical movement is nothing but the deep-drawn breath of the swimmer slowly emerging from the deep. And I suggest that this poem happened so because Tennyson was actually and violently living the moment of release in his own mind and soul. He could not and did



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not stand back as the poet must. He was a lover in the first moment of love's acknowledgment, and he was therefore inarticulate. But in XVIII Tennyson had recollected himself, and remembered that after all he was a man in the middle forties. There had been a sweet madness in his blood, but that was a long time since. It must not be allowed to die unrecorded and unhonoured, that great moment. The lover turned to the poet and asked him to be his recording angel, and the poet was not found wanting:

There is none like her, none.  
Nor will be when our summers have deceased,  
O, art thou sighing for Lebanon  
In the long breeze that streams to thy delicious East,  
Sighing for Lebanon,  
Dark cedar, tho' thy limbs have here increased,  
Upon a pastoral slope as fair,  
And looking to the South, and fed  
With honey'd rain and delicate air,  
And haunted by the starry head  
Of her whose gentle will has changed my fate,  
And made my life a perfumed altar-flame;  
And over whom thy darkness must have spread  
With such delight as theirs of old, thy great  
Forefathers of the thornless garden, there  
Shadowing the snow-limb'd Eve from whom she came?

In these lines there is a swinging ease that the freer verse of stanzas V and XIV could not attain. For here the poet has attained the greater freedom which results not from disobedience to the rules but from their conquest. The metre is as unconscious of bonds as a great dancer of her steps, but

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in both cases the final triumph is due to a groundwork of faithful and meticulous accuracy in the measure. And mark further how the image of the cedar transmutes the direct and breathless emotion of the preceding stanza into a spreading branch-like gravity. Actually the sense of that strange beloved tree, charged with a thousand years of alien emotion, is in the shape of the lines. If ever words were branch-charmed these are. Nor shall we fail to detect that as the slow inevitable cadence beats up and on echoes of the greatest of all our poets stray into the line and become proudly native there. If 'forefathers of the thornless garden' looks back to Keats and forward to Swinburne, who wrote the lines:

O why should Love, like men in drinking-songs,  
Spice his fair banquet with the dust of death?

No, you are wrong. It was not the Elizabethan. It was the Victorian Tennyson in *Maud*—and he had earned the right to speak so.

Stanzas XIX, XX, and XXI are a sharp relapse into misgiving that lumbers on the edge of something worse than prose. After the altitude of the great XVIIIth stanza the metre finds it hard to forgive the declension, and limps as though it had been wounded to death. It is barely conceivable that the lark, after falling headlong into heaven, should be recalled to earth to observe amiably:

But to-morrow, if we live,  
Our ponderous Squire will give  
A grand political dinner,

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adding

For I am not invited.

Yet such is the strange power of this poem that this almost wanton bathos is not wholly an artistic mistake. We are hobbling back to earth, and thought and metre hobble with us. It is a concession to our mortal weakness which, having been swept out of control by stanza XIX is presently to be asked to confront stanza XXII—one of the greatest love-poems in the English language:

Come into the garden, Maud,  
For the black bat, night, has flown,  
Come into the garden, Maud,  
I am here at the gate alone;  
And the woodbine spices are wafted abroad,  
And the musk of the rose is blown.

It is significant that as in stanza XIX there is a reversion to a wholly regular form. It is significant because the great wings have taken the air and are beating with a steady, faultless rhythm for the stars. Indeed, there is such a hush that, as John Bright said in a very different connection, you can almost hear the beating of those wings. Higher and higher the cadence rises, stroke after stroke of light and sound, checking and hovering in the fourth, eighth, ninth, and tenth verses lest it should pass clean out of sight and hearing. It rises on those soaring pinions from the diaphanous ease of the seventh verse to check thus in the eighth:

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The slender acacia would not shake  
One long milk-bloom on the tree;  
The white lake-blossom fell into the lake  
As the pimpernel dozed on the lea;  
But the rose was awake all night for your sake,  
Knowing your promise to me;  
The lilies and roses were all awake  
They sigh'd for the dawn and thee.

That verse gathers not only all the cadences of the seven before it but almost pensively prepares the way for the ninth, to make one last ascent before the wings come to rest in their high haven:

Queen rose of the rosebud garden of girls,  
Come hither, the dances are done,  
In gloss of satin and glimmer of pearls,  
Queen lily and rose in one;  
Shine out, little head, sunning over with curls,  
To the flowers, and be their sun.

The rose *motif* that was given out in

Maud has a garden of roses

is now fulfilled in an elaborate embroidery of beauty, and it is time for the two last verses to consecrate the whole with rest after flight. Slowly the perfect words perfectly settle into their appointed place:

There has fallen a splendid tear  
From the passion-flower at the gate.  
She is coming, my dove, my dear;  
She is coming, my life, my fate;  
The red rose cries, 'She is near, she is near,'  
And the white rose weeps, 'She is late,'  
The larkspur listens, 'I hear, I hear,'  
And the lily whispers, 'I wait.'

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She is coming, my own, my sweet;  
Were it ever so airy a tread,  
My heart would hear her and beat,  
Were it earth in an earthy bed;  
My dust would hear her and beat,  
Had I lain for a century dead;  
Would start and tremble under her feet,  
And blossom in purple and red.

And so passing beyond a cloud, dyed with the sun, the bird is home with the ultimate song of which it was the feathered image. All the harshnesses, all the twists, all the turns, all the expectations in Part I of the poem have conspired to create that moment. It is the summary, the meaning and the justification of them all.

*Maud* might, indeed, perhaps should, have ended there. It is hard after that passing into the sunset to come back to the first stanza of Part II, and verse as angry-formless as the passion that led to the slaying of Maud's brother in the duel. Happy we if we could have been spared:

A cry for a brother's blood:  
It will ring in my heart and ears, till I die, till I die.

Yet it was necessary to satisfy the dark melancholy that was the background of Tennyson's mind to end in sorrow. The poem for him needed its three periods—darkness, light, and then the recurrent dark in fatal fugue. And if the first stanza of Part II is like the XVIIth of Part I, rather an inarticulate outcry than poetry, it is no less redeemed than the other by the following stanza. In this he im-

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ports the light image of a shell to contrast with the dark chaos of what went before just as in the earlier stanzas he used the shade of the cedar as the foil to the preceding brightness. In both instances in point of artistic propriety he is brilliantly right. In the earlier poem the slow spreading metre brought quiet to the heart after the short, almost jagged, breathlessness of the XVIIth stanza. Here verse as articulate as the whorls of the shell restores the balance shaken by the loose despair of the first stanza of Part II. Once again the metre with unflinching rectitude is moulded to the innermost thought:

The tiny cell is forlorn,  
Void of the living will  
That made it stir on the shore.  
Did he stand at the diamond door  
Of his house in a rainbow frill?  
Did he push, when he was uncurl'd,  
A golden foot or a fairy horn  
Thro' his dim water-world?

Even Coleridge would have been hard put to it more certainly to acclimatize the delicacy of dream, and when Flecker wrote of 'the wise snail-fish' he may well have had this passage in mind. Once again with bewildering certainty Tennyson has found the moment of peace between excesses of emotion. For he is on the way now to the heavy little third stanza, and the lasting beauty of the lament in the fourth:

O that 'twere possible  
After long grief and pain  
To find the arms of my true love  
Round me once again!

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Here Tennyson has certainly anticipated *de la Mare*. At the end of each line he gives the heart time for one beat and yet carries the movement over. This is the grace-note in verse, which with *de la Mare* is the master-key that unlocks the posterns of the world of sleep. With Tennyson it suffers sorrow to find peace after purgation. Nor is it an accident of one verse. Even more movingly the poet touches the same string in the eleventh verse of this stanza:

Alas for her that met me,  
That heard me softly call,  
Came glimmering thro' the laurels  
At the quiet evenfall,  
In the garden by the turrets  
Of the old manorial hall.

The dissyllables at the end of the third and fifth lines hang even heavier than the single syllables of the first verse, and then fall as softly into the succeeding line.

But after this last stroke of beauty blackness resumes its empire and the great anarch lets the curtain fall. In the last stanza of Part II, and the dull anguish of Part III, the light is out. Desperately in verse the rhythm seeks to rescue the poet with the resurgent rose *motif*:

But I know where a garden grows,  
Fairer than aught in the world beside,  
All made up of the lily and rose  
That blow by night, when the season is good,  
To the sound of dancing music and flutes;

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It is too late. The time of roses is over, and all the metrical wizardry in the world can do no more than, reproducing the sound of falling clods of earth, mutter:

And somebody, surely some kind heart will come  
To bury me, bury me  
Deeper, ever so little deeper.

All that remains is the pitiful attempt in Part II to find salvation in war. There is one last flash of beauty when the poet writes of his beloved appearing:

Like a silent lightning under the stars. †

But neither verse nor love can save him now. Passion has burnt itself and beauty out. For the simples of the dream there is applied the coarse salve of murderous forgetfulness, and the poem ends with the acceptance of war as release with the lines:

I have felt with my native land, I am one with my kind,  
I embrace the purpose of God, and the doom assign'd.

But the poet's blood was wiser than his pen. This was only the dead man murmuring in his fitful sleep. And yet it rounds up the movement of the whole poem. It began with black despair and ends with a whisper from the grave after every variation in the whole range of the fiddler has been touched. It is complete and it is Tennyson.

It will not be necessary to pursue further the contention that merely as a matter of form *Maud*



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definitely affected the course of late English poetry. Not only, as I have attempted to show, did it introduce the modern narrative-poem, but in actual texture it has touched and changed subsequent prosody. I do not, of course, suggest that Walter de la Mare directly copied his cadences from Tennyson, or that Swinburne had

. Queen rose of the rosebud garden of girls

in mind when he wrote:

White rose in red rose-garden is not more white

nor that A. E. Housman when he wrote *The Shropshire Lad* had heard an echo in his mind of:

Ah, what shall I be at fifty  
Should nature keep me alive,  
If I find the world so bitter  
When I am but twenty-five?

or that W. B. Yeats had even read his own rhythm used for the first time in:

Strange that the mind when fraught  
With a passion so intense  
One would think that it well  
Might drown all life in the eye.

or that Flecker actually imitated the verse that I have already quoted. But I do suggest two things. First, that Tennyson definitely enriched the English measure to the extent that his successors were often elaborating his experiments, and

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secondly, that for mere fertility of metrical invention he would merit and hold a high place in the front rank of English verse, if he had done nothing more.

But he did much more. In spite of the sneers of those either too tired or self-conscious to have felt deeply themselves, Tennyson is the poet of passion in a way that Swinburne never achieved. And by passion I do not mean desire, oaths, and blood. I mean the power and the need to live fiercely and to burn without diminishing. It seems to me that there is more immolation and rebirth of the Phoenix in *Maud* than in all Swinburne's lovely *autos-da-fé*:

Thou wert fair in the fearless old fashion,  
And thy limbs are as melodies yet  
And move to the music of passion  
With lithe and lascivious regret.  
What ailed us, O gods, to desert you  
For creeds that refuse and restrain,  
Come down and redeem us from virtue,  
Our Lady of Pain.

wrote Swinburne eagerly flinging all the modern world upon the Inquisitorial flame. But Swinburne found that sacrifice too easy. There was no conflict in his soul of that savage kind which alone by the friction of opposites strikes out the final spark of passion. It is precisely because there were two natures violently at grips in Tennyson that he wrote in his great moments with such heat. For all Swinburne's adorable raptures and roses he has

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no such movement of black despair breaking into the splendour of reluctant flame as in:

Has our whole earth gone nearer to the glow  
Of your soft splendours that you look so bright?  
I have climb'd nearer out of lonely Hell.  
Beat, happy stars, timing with things below,  
Beat with my heart more blest than heart can tell,  
Blest, but for some dark undercurrent woe  
That seems to draw—but it shall not be so:  
Let all be well, be well.

Indeed, so far from its being true that Tennyson declined into a contented domesticity of the soul, the force of *Maud* is derived not least from the internecine struggle between the man of his time, who strove to make order out of spiritual chaos, and the poet and lover for whom chaos had its own lovely and irredeemable law. It is thus that the much criticized quality of seer-in-ordinary to the British public gives its cutting edge to the heart's apprehension of beauty. The struggle—which Tennyson waged all his life—is crystallized in *Maud* and gives the poem not a little of its poignant significance.

In the first stanza of all the poet is brooding on social wrong. This may seem to those who know that nothing is worth worrying about shallow, but it was burningly real to Tennyson, and in so far as it represents the permanent antagonism between man and his environment has, however commonplace its outward expression, a lasting significance:

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But these are the days of advance, the works of the men of mind,

When who but a fool would have faith in a tradesman's ware or his word?

Is it peace or war? Civil war, as I think, and that of a kind  
The viler, as underhand, not openly bearing the sword.

Peace sitting under her olive, and slurring the days gone by,  
When the poor are hovell'd and hustled together, each sex,  
like swine,

When only the ledger lives, and when only not all men lie;  
Peace in her vineyard—yes! but a company forges the wine.

This outburst has a double value for the poem. It is on the one hand an honest exhibition of social misgiving which gives a bottom to the lover's character, and on the other hand it helps to prepare by sharp contrast the way to the lover's exaltation. Again and again in the poem when the lover despairs the doubt reaches out and creeps in a black mist along the known world:

The man of science himself is fonder of glory, and vain,  
An eye well-practised in nature, a spirit bounded and poor;  
The passionate heart of the poet is whirl'd into folly and vice.  
I would not marvel at either, but keep a temperate brain;  
For not to desire or admire, if a man could learn it, were more  
Than to walk all day like the sultan of old in a garden of spice.

But Tennyson could not walk all day in a garden, not even in the high hall-garden. Nor were his always and often 'the quiet woodland ways'. He was dragged both by the truth and the falsehood in him to places

Where each man walks with his head in a cloud of poisonous flies.

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Thus when the lover is 'sick of a jealous dread' his mind turns to the iniquities of the old grandfather:

Gone to a blacker pit, for whom  
Grimy nakedness dragging his trucks  
And laying his trams in a poison'd gloom  
Wrought, till he crept from a gutted mine  
Master of half a servile shore.

(And remember half-a-century later Ralph Hodgson crying out against the misuse of 'blind pit-ponies'!) And very soon he is concerning himself with the question that is almost as much a *motif* as the rose—whether war has her victories no less renowned than peace. Nor let the easy pacifism to which we have now generally attained discount this reaction as negligible. War is an abomination beyond all abominations, but there is such a thing as not being proud enough to fight. Nor in a world of anarchy need we gird at Tennyson for dreaming of:

One still strong man in a blatant land,  
Whatever they call him, what care I,  
Aristocrat, democrat, autocrat—one  
Who can rule and dare not lie.

This concentration on war and peace is partly a conscious and partly an unconscious antithesis to the private war which is to terminate in the duel fought in 'the dreadful hollow'. It is a proleptic justification of the right to kill in a just cause—a justification openly claimed in Part II of the poem thus:

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Friend, to be struck by the public foe,  
Then to strike him and lay him low,  
That were a public merit, far,  
Whatever the Quaker holds, from sin;  
But the red life spilt for a private blow—  
I swear to you, lawful and lawless war  
Are scarcely even akin.

One may not agree, indeed one cannot agree, but the question is a living one, and Tennyson's contribution to it had the merit of integrity and passion, and he was entitled to cry for his age:

No more shall commerce be all in all, and Peace  
Pipe on her pastoral hillock a languid note,  
And watch her harvest ripen, her herd increase,  
Nor the cannon-bullet rust on a slothful shore,  
And the cobweb woven across the cannon's throat  
Shall shake its threaded tears in the wind no more.

And we can even bring ourselves to understand if not to forgive:

Let it flame or fade, and the war roll down like a wind,  
We have proved we have hearts in a cause, we are noble still,  
And myself have awaked, as it seems, to the better mind;  
It is better to fight for the good, than to rail at the ill;  
I have felt with my native land, I am one with my kind,  
I embrace the purpose of God, and the doom assign'd.

A poor consolation for a broken heart no doubt but it has passion to the end. For it is the poet making his last sacrifice to the doctrine that Arthur Hallam ingeminated. He will immolate even his poet's soul to that allegiance. It is pathetic, it is folly, but it is passionate. And thus on its last note *Maud*

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rings the great gong of action, and the lover lays down his soul for his friend. Greater love hath no man, and *Maud* from the first to the last line is sealed with that passionate abnegation, that despairing vision, and that redeeming love.

## CHAPTER III

### CONCLUSION

MY purpose in concentrating on *Maud* was to prove by a single example that much recent criticism of Tennyson was the result rather of reaction against Victorianism than of reading the poet. I believed (and believe) that if it could be demonstrated that one considerable poem, written in his middle years, was more passionate than Swinburne, more various in execution than *Lollingdon Downs*, and as great an innovation as *The Ancient Mariner*, it would not be necessary to attempt a further examination of *The Idylls of the King* or of the Plays to support my contention that Tennyson, so far from being the muffled poet of domestic horizons, was as lonely and as wild as his own eagle:

He clasps the crag with crooked hands ;  
Close to the sun in lonely lands,  
Ring'd with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;  
He watches from his mountain walls,  
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

Nevertheless, it would be unjust to the author of *Maud* not to consider how far he declined in *The Idylls* into something wholly alien from his true



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nature. The Dedication to *The Idylls* is saddening not because of the note of forced admiration of the Prince Consort—forgivable in a Poet Laureate—but because of Tennyson's complete misapprehension of the true character of Albert. It is plain that the Prince who is celebrated as

Modest, kindly, all-accomplish'd, wise,  
With what sublime repression of himself,  
And in what limits, and how tenderly ;

was a dangerous pedant, whose rigidity of mind and temper might well have led to disaster. Albert the Good was, it seems, of that dissenting type of goodness that does infinitely more harm than downright villainy, and, if modern historians are to be believed, his influence on Victoria was wholly sinister. That is of no importance except as indicating that Tennyson was taking his impressions sentimentally and at second-hand. It was a convenient popular fiction that the Prince Consort was the type of King Arthur, and Tennyson, too, like an obedient leader-writer, took or pretended to take the fiction at its face-value.

That was bad and dangerous. For I imagine that Tennyson in writing his *Idylls* meant to do for English legend what Yeats and the Celtic revival successfully performed for Irish legend. He intended, that is, to remind England of her great ancestry, and to bid the future resume the glories of the past. We know that in a time of rabid industrialism and shifting beliefs he was on the side

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of the angels. That is not in itself, whatever our young ferocious may claim, an impossible attitude for a poet. Milton, for example, affirmed, Wordsworth affirmed, and Yeats affirms. To whimper in a corner and to shed tears of pity over one's own hopeless degeneration is, I am prepared to admit, a fashionable basis for verse, but in face of the examples I have quoted, I suggest that it is not the only basis. But if it is to be affirmation, it must be the everlasting 'yes' and not a dubious 'aye' dictated by considerations of party policy. If a poet is with the angels, they must be angels of the kind of Abdiel, who cry to the forces of evil, when they cross them, as he cried to Lucifer:

Proud, art thou met!

The angel of the Tennyson of *Maud* was such a sworder with such wings of flame. But the angels of *The Idylls* walked in the shadow of Albert the Good. They had a little the air of figures erected to introduce the International Exhibition of 1862, and they were not indisposed to permit their viols to be tuned to such utterance as:

The world-compelling plan was thine,  
And lo! the long laborious miles  
Of Palace, lo! the giant aisles  
Rich in model and design.

It would be exaggeration to say that Tennyson confused Albert with Arthur. But it is true that

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Malory's mediaeval warrior did suffer some alleviation from Saxe-Coburg. Camelot put off its

crown of sunshine, dew and flame

and remembered a week-end at Windsor.

This was perhaps inevitable. Tennyson, if my guess is right, suffered twenty years of agony. That agony burned up and out in *Maud* with the anger of a great funeral-pyre. Certainly there remained the force that could blaze into *Lucretius* and at the last could write in *Crossing the Bar* a poem as nobly simple as Landor's farewell to life. Nevertheless something died with *Maud* and thereafter Tennyson wrote because he most brilliantly could and not because he could none other.

If so much is admitted, must we then admit that Tennyson is not one of the permanent Thrones of English verse? Must we confess that while Shakespeare's last play was *The Tempest* and Wordsworth grew from strength to strength, Tennyson, falling from his high estate as he aged, abdicated? Emphatically no. There is enough poetry of major beauty and significance in Tennyson to rank him with all but the five or six greatest of all. He came when the Lake School was sinking into silence. For half a century his single flame illuminated a dark and disastrous period of English history—dark and disastrous because it was steadily and remorselessly destroying the old civilization without creating a new. He fought with his times and not once or twice he rallied his countrymen in

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their Gadarene procession to the sea. But much more than that he sang, and his voice was heard through rolling drums. He sang, and since the gift of song is given to every nightingale, and to one man in every fifty years, he had the favour of the gods before which all criticism falls. Tennyson's greatest individual poem and one of the greatest poems in the English language is *Tears, Idle Tears* from *The Princess*. I have mentioned the nightingale. This June I was in a copse of fir-trees on a spur below the Salève—the lion-hill of Geneva. It was a night of stars and moon making their rendezvous with their bright shadows in the broad Rhone at my feet. In the deeps of the wood the bird began his strange charged lament. 'Eternal passion, eternal pain'—eternal passion because it is the note of the lover in the night, eternal pain because the music knows what the bird cannot, that love and beauty pass with their fulfilment. I thought of Keats, and how for him the singer had meant:

Magic casements opening on the foam  
Of perilous seas in fairylands forlorn.

But this is not the sorrow of elf-land, I thought. It is the old Thracian sorrow of youth and love and happiness that go. It is closer to the heart than that withdrawn wizardry of Keats. It is the 'lacrimae rerum', I thought, and as I thought I heard Tennyson interpreting the nightingale for all

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time and for all of us in those words as lasting and  
as eternally fresh as that moon-laden song:

Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,  
Tears from the depth of some divine despair  
Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes,  
In looking on the happy Autumn-fields,  
And thinking of the days that are no more.

Fresh as the first beam glittering on a sail,  
That brings our friends up from the underworld,  
Sad as the last which reddens over one  
That sinks with all we love below the verge;  
So sad, so fresh, the days that are no more.

Ah, sad and strange as in dark summer dawns  
The earliest pipe of half-awaken'd birds  
To dying ears, when unto dying eyes  
The casement slowly grows a glimmering square;  
So sad, so strange, the days that are no more.

Dear as remember'd kisses after death,  
And sweet as those by hopeless fancy feign'd  
On lips that are for others; deep as love,  
Deep as first love, and wild with all regret;  
O death in Life, the days that are no more.

